

# Halakhah and Women's League for Conservative Judaism

Ellen S. Wolintz-Fields

Often when I meet someone and they hear that I am a rabbi, they ask where my pulpit is located. They assume that a rabbi has to have a pulpit and be a congregational rabbi. Nowadays, rabbis are found in many different venues, not only in the congregational pulpit life. I was a pulpit rabbi, in the traditional sense, serving three different synagogue communities for the first eighteen years of my rabbinate. In 2018, I began my dream job as the executive director of Women's League for Conservative Judaism (WLCJ). The mission statement of the WLCJ reads as follows: "Women's League for Conservative Judaism engages, enriches, empowers and unites our Conservative/Masorti members. We promote the sense of community, provide opportunities for learning and advocacy, and cultivate leaders. We are committed to Israel and the Torah Fund Campaign."

Our members are from approximately three hundred different communities, which means that they have over three hundred rabbinic opinions providing them guidance. As the first rabbi to serve as executive director of WLCJ, I am its religious decisor, or *mara de'atra*, on the international level. When I make decisions for the organization, I am very cognizant of the fact that our women are members of Sisterhood affiliates and need to follow the rabbis of their local communities as their local *mara de'atra*. However, it is very meaningful and humbling to be the *mara de'atra* of WLCJ, helping 27,000 women internationally come to halachic decisions.

Two very powerful spiritual decisions that I was able to facilitate both have to do with virtual *tefillah*, or prayer. Families today do not live near each other. Furthermore, people often do not live in close proximity to a synagogue. In addition, many communities do not have a daily minyan. This poses a dilemma when someone wants to be with their family when they need to say *Kaddish* and observe a *yahrzheit* but do not live near them or a synagogue. Such a situation was brought to my attention in the summer of 2019, long before COVID. Members of WLCJ who were sisters by blood were observing the *yahrzheit* of their mother, and they wanted to be able to

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say *Kaddish* together. But there were a number of dilemmas: they did not live near each other, it was Father's Day, and their local synagogues were not having services. WLCJ always used Zoom for meetings and learning, so I was asked if we could use it to gather people together to say *Kaddish*. I reread Avram Israel Reisner's 2001 *teshuvah* from the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS), "Wired to the Kadosh Barukh Hu: Minyan via Internet," and studied my teacher and colleague's responsa.

On June 13, 2019 (an auspicious day), I wrote the following email in response to the question about a virtual minyan for my WLCJ sisters:

I have been studying the *teshuvah*, and I do not agree with how Rabbi Reisner pasqened (decided) in 2001. But that is why I am the *mara de'atra*, and can interpret it how I see fit. In 2001, he said ten people had to be together and then one could join them via cyberspace. I think that today, it is more possible than it was in 2001, to have ten people in separate places, and seeing each other totally fine, and feeling together as a *qehillah*, community, even if ten are not all together, but two may be in one place, four in another, etc., until ten are all together on the screen. That is more practical today. So times have even changed since 2001. Bottom line, ten can be in various places in my opinion, and together on Zoom, to constitute a minyan. Reisner in 2001 said the ten had to be in one place, and then others can be added virtually.

We arranged a Zoom line and sent an email to inform people about our upcoming virtual service. We hoped that at least ten Jewish adults would join the Zoom meeting, with their cameras on, so two sisters could say *Kaddish*. Once the information was disseminated about when the virtual minyan would be, it was discovered that many women had to say *Kaddish* that evening. It was truly a lovely service. As the *mara de'atra* of WLCJ, I helped our organization, as an international community, be ahead of our time. We put into practice the concept that a community can be defined in many different ways.

In June 2019, when I was asked if we could have virtual minyan so some WLCJ Sisters could be together to say *Kaddish*, we could not foresee that this would soon become common practice. While searching my thousands of emails, I found an email I wrote on June 18, 2019, to Elliot Dorff, the sitting

chair of the CJLS, while contemplating my decision for WLCJ. I wrote, “I want to talk to you and Avi about updating his *teshuvah* on virtual minyan. I think things have changed since 2001.” At that time, I had the privilege of being a member of the CJLS, so we did talk about virtual minyan, but at that time no one thought it was necessary to write a new *teshuvah*.

Fast forward to March 2020 and COVID. We closed our offices and began working virtually on Wednesday, March 11, 2020. I met with some of our WLCJ international leadership, and we knew that our women were going to be isolated and would need community. We did not realize how isolated we would all become and for how long. Many of our women needed to say *Kaddish*, so I began to think about how it is common in some synagogues to recite an extra Psalm and then an additional Mourner’s *Kaddish* if someone had a *yahrzeit*. On Sunday, March 15, 2020, with my guidance as the *mara de’atra* of the WLCJ, we launched a Zoom program for our sisters, and whoever else wanted to join, that would allow them to recite a Psalm and say *Kaddish*. We decided that just saying the Psalm was not enough, so we began to also learn what the Psalm meant. As the days progressed, we added the singing of *Mishabeirakh*, a prayer for healing. We each shared the names of those for whom we were praying, and for whom we were saying *Kaddish*, and as the list got longer, we began to pause so that we could quietly say the names to ourselves. We came up with an organized way to have people sign up to participate. We streamed our program on Facebook and have always been open to people who are not members of WLCJ.

As the half-hour, Sunday-through-Friday program continued, we realized we needed a name with more depth and significance. When anyone asked a WLCJ sister if she would be on “Psalms,” she knew the reference. Yet, as our virtual sacred space grew, we needed a name for it that would hold special meaning for our WLCJ sisters. The Torah Fund of Women’s League for Conservative Judaism is the designated philanthropy of WLCJ, which helps support programs and student scholarships at the Jewish Theological Seminary (New York), the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies (Los Angeles), the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies (Jerusalem), Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano (Buenos Aires), and Zacharias Frankel College (Potsdam, now Abraham Joshua Heschel Seminary). Each year there is a different Torah Fund campaign, and the 2020–21 theme was *beyahad*, “together.” When we debated what our virtual prayer community should be called, we tossed around a number of different names and finally decided on Makom B’Yachad, because during the pandemic it was our place to be together. And it continues to be our sacred space. Eventually we moved from meeting six

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days a week to five, and we continue to meet three days a week. Our Makom B'Yachad participants come from all time zones and all backgrounds.

Makom B'Yachad, our WLCJ virtual sanctuary, is truly a sacred space to share happy times and sad times. We hold *shiva minyanim* and *Yizkor* services, we host special programming for Jewish holidays in addition to International Women's Day, and we recite Hallel together on Rosh Hodesh. We have added prayers for Israel and the hostages, and I wrote one compiling the many individual prayers we say as well. We also sing "Hatikvah." We have often had guest speakers, especially after October 7. After we concluded our study of the entire book of Psalms, we had a *siyyum*, complete with people sharing their own original psalms.

We needed teachers in addition to me. Occasionally, one of our WLCJ women would teach about the psalm. Eventually, we hired a part-time educator, Rabbi Margie Cella, to join our WLCJ staff to teach as well. Friday is the day that our members lead a lively discussion about *parashat hashavuah*, the weekly Torah reading. Since March 15, 2020, we have had a *siyyum* ceremony for everything we have completed learning during Makom B'Yachad, which includes the book of Psalms, Pirkei Avot (Ethics of our Ancestors), the book of Ruth, Song of Songs, the book of Proverbs, and several tractates of the Mishnah, including Rosh Hashanah, Qiddushin, and Middot. At the time of writing this article, Rabbi Cella is teaching texts related to female personalities in Jewish texts, and I am teaching m. Niddah.

How were some of these texts chosen, you might ask? Prior to COVID, WLCJ was engaged in an eighteen-month study of m. Berakhot and was supposed to have a *siyyum* at our 2020 international convention. We still had the *siyyum*, but, like the convention, it became virtual. I realized that once we had completed studying Berakhot, Pirkei Avot, and Rosh Hashanah, I decided that we should learn a tractate from every seder, or order, of the Mishnah. It has been a wonderful accomplishment to study all these sacred texts in our holy Makom B'Yachad community. Until our 2023 international convention, many women had never met each other, and it was truly special to meet our Makom sisters. One member even made pins as gifts to the Makom regulars.

As the executive director of the WLCJ, it is an honor and a privilege to be the *mara de'atra* on the international level for 27,000 women and help interpret the *teshuvot* generated by the CJLS. The virtual minyan I helped establish for our women was the path to helping create a truly sacred space of prayer, learning, and friendship—a Makom B'Yachad, or place for our members to be together.

## Ellen S. Wolintz-Fields

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*Rabbi Ellen S. Wolintz-Fields has served as the first rabbi in the position of executive director of Women's League for Conservative Judaism. Prior to 2018, she was the Vice President for Congregational Engagement at Israel Tour Connection and served for eighteen years as a congregational rabbi and educational director in Toms River, New Jersey, as well as Grayslake and Long Grove, Illinois.*